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SUBJECT: CORRUPTION ON THE FOREFRONT OF TAJIKS' MINDS

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¶1. (U) SUMMARY: "Anti-Corruption" has become the Tajik government's new buzzword, as President Rahmonov and his cabinet publicly tout new initiatives to combat a problem that pervades every sector, ranging from health and education, to traffic police, to privatization and licensing. Despite the rhetoric and the establishment of a new anti-corruption agency, few measures have the teeth to stop widespread practices or curb government abuse. A Center for Strategic Research Studies and United Nations public opinion survey confirms the extent of the problem, describes the negative impact on individuals and the country, and reveals the people's frustration with corruption. U.S. assistance programs continue to institutionalize anti-corruption efforts in all sectors. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The government's Center for Strategic Research Studies and the United Nations Development Program jointly sponsored public opinion survey directly states, "The Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, which, beyond a doubt, is fully aware of the levels of corruption repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the process of democratization has become especially vulnerable because of the increasing scale of corruption." Corruption is so prevalent and engrained in Tajik society that most people do not bat an eyelash when a traffic officer pulls a car over and demands a bribe. Most Tajiks would rather pay a fee to a government bureaucrat in order to register their cars or real estate than spend months or years fighting paperwork. University students regularly pay off underpaid professors to obtain their grades and degrees rather than actually study and receive an education. The most popular university in Tajikistan is the State Tax Institute, which this year enrolls 23,800 students, more than any other university, but is housed in a single, 6-story building. Students want to work for the state tax authority—one of the most corrupt and lucrative state agencies, known for its ability to extort virtually every sector from small businesses to international NGOs to private citizens. Nepotism and regionalism are accepted as cultural norms, even sometimes perceived as a social obligation rather than a dishonest practice.

A CORRUPT ANTI-CORRUPTION AGENCY?

13. (U) Acknowledging corruption as a problem, President Rahmonov signed into effect January 10 the new Financial Control and Anti-Corruption Agency first announced during the government restructuring of November 2006. Creating this agency constitutes an important step towards fighting a problem that plagues Tajikistan's economic development and impedes human rights and democratic development. However, critics-- both international workers and locals--doubt the new agency will do little to truly curb corruption at the highest echelons. A UNDP anti-corruption project favored creating an independent corruption agency in the parliamentary branch instead of under the control of the presidency.

14. (SBU) Ironically, the new agency head, Sherkhon Salimov, is a former Dushanbe prosecutor widely known to have used his position of power to engage in corrupt practices. Because of his nefarious activities as prosecutor, the powers above precipitously yanked him from his position. He later became a deputy in parliament. Immediately prior to heading the anti-corruption agency, Salimov chaired parliament's Committee on Constitutional Guarantees, a body tasked with ensuring new laws meet constitutional standards. Instead, the committee has a reputation for ignoring human rights standards altogether. Salimov's appointment has been a source of humor and dismay among many Embassy contacts in the government, who believe the appointment indicates the government's insincere attitude towards combating corruption, or President Rahmonov's complete isolation from the reputation and documented records of his appointees.

15. (U) During a January 26 UNDP co-sponsored conference unveiling a public opinion report on corruption in Tajikistan, EmbOffs present saw that Salimov could not fully articulate the agency's goals or explain the scope of the agency's powers and its ability to arrest or bring criminals to justice. Using donor-friendly buzzwords, he described the agency as a "coordination agency" with responsibility to oversee the fight against corruption, encourage transparency and defend human

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rights. He excused himself by saying that the agency is new and its activities have yet to be defined. Conference participants noted the agency lacks independence, reports to the president rather than outside the executive branch. Despite its coordination role, the agency has no enforcement capabilities against more powerful authorities in other ministries, such as the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor General's office, known for their ability to manipulate the system and solicit bribes.

16. (SBU) President Rahmonov has publicly spoken in support of the fight against corruption. Local politicians consider Rahmonov's directive to curb corruption as genuine, but believe the president himself is powerless to resolve the problem. The president could send a clear sign that he is serious about fighting corruption if he fired senior level government officials receiving kick-backs or prosecuted corrupt businessmen, but few believe he has the courage or inclination to take on his inner supporters or, in some cases, relatives.

17. (SBU) Senior Ministers have dutifully repeated Rahmonov's public statements to EmbOffs, but seem unwilling or unable to fathom the extent of the problem. One minister brushed off the idea that the traffic police were taking bribes, and suggested that drivers were pulled over only for violating traffic rules. (Note: It is obvious from casual observation that traffic police pull cars over at random for no apparent violation, even while they take no action to deal with drivers speeding or running red lights. End note.) One senior minister asked the Ambassador "Who is corrupt? Prove it to me and I'll deal with it!" as if to suggest that the lack of names meant there was not really a problem.

THE PEOPLE SPEAK OUT

18. (U) Are the Tajik people finally fed-up with corruption?

Thirty-five citizens protested in front of the Supreme Court against a corrupt judiciary on January 29. According to media reports, unfair court rulings and the imminent General City Planning Project, which threatens to displace approximately 4,000 families from the center of Dushanbe, spurred citizens to action against the corrupt court system. Since demonstrating without a permit is illegal in Tajikistan, authorities quickly dispersed the protestors.

¶9. (U) The United Nations Development Program and the Tajik government's Center for Strategic Research Studies corroborated on a comprehensive study surveying public opinion on corruption in Tajikistan. The study did not shy away from revealing the corruption's epidemic proportions. According to the survey, over 58 percent of respondents cite corruption as a "main problem in everyday life." Nearly 64 percent believe that corruption is a "priority problem" for the country. Respondents answered that the most corrupt government organizations are the courts, local governments, and law enforcement bodies. No respondents believed that any government agency was entirely free of corruption, although over 36 percent answered that the president's apparatus was "always clean." In order to tackle the problem, those surveyed advocated for an independent anti-corruption institute but also said that higher salaries, strict financial punishment and material incentives for informants would help fight corruption.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

¶10. (U) The survey team's analysis listed 40 recommendations and proposals to combat corruption including the creation of an independent mass media, support for civil society institutions, reform of the civil service, and international cooperation in the law enforcement sector. It also called for increased dialogue between the government, civil society and the public.

¶11. (U) Embassy Dushanbe already incorporates anti-corruption components into many of our assistance programs. U.S.-funded programs target corruption prevention by training law enforcement, military officials and judicial employees on Tajik legislation and rule-of-law principles. Partner non-governmental organizations also work with the general population to raise awareness and educate the public about its civil and human rights and legal capacity to fight corruption.

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Through the Public Affairs Section Democracy Commission and grants from the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, international and local organizations train journalists in order to increase transparency. The Office of Defense Cooperation will be sponsoring a seminar entitled "Legal and Ethical Concerns in Public Agencies." As widespread as corruption is in Tajik society, U.S. efforts need to be equally as prevalent.

¶12. (U) COMMENT: The corruption problem is both simple and complex. On the one hand, the government should remove those found guilty of accepting bribes and abusing their influence or official positions and prosecute them under Tajik law. On the other hand, decision-makers raised by Soviet standards of perks for the powerful may not define their behavior as corrupt, or may assume they are protected by their connections or positions. Rahmonov's inner-circle of loyal supporters, many of them relatives of the president, are rumored to be the most corrupt. Until the public sees them facing the consequences of their actions, no one will have much faith in the new "anti-corruption" efforts.

¶13. (U) The new Financial Control and Anti-Corruption Agency has managed to make the discussion of corruption public and has received the attention, if not the action, of the government. Almost all political parties cite combating corruption as a top priority in their platforms. As the public opinion survey shows, the public remains well aware of the corrupt practices engrained in government structures. It is a good sign the government's think-tank has cooperated with the UN to publish an

open and honest public opinion survey. This shows the time is ripe to establish stronger anti-corruption measures in Tajikistan. With catalysts like the threatened housing evictions and continued assistance from international organizations, Tajiks are waking up to the direct effects of corruption. It remains to be seen whether public opinion will be enough to push the new anti-corruption agency to do its job.
END COMMENT.
JACOBSON